

# Mentors Help Guide Entrepreneur's Businesses

Cynthia



Nigerian entrepreneur Cynthia proved that there is financial and environmental value in cassava peels.

A finalist in the 2014 Global Innovation through Science and Technology competition and a YALI Network member, Cynthia developed a way to convert cassava peels into nutritious goat feed. Farmers had perceived the peels as a useless byproduct and burned them as a cheap way of disposal. But that practice releases harmful pollutants into the atmosphere.

Nigeria is the world's largest producer of cassava, each year growing 40 metric tons and generating 12 million metric tons of peels. When burned, those peels release more than 10 million tons of toxic carbon monoxide in the air.


Cynthia's solution to the problem begins with a simple platform on which peels are dried. The dried peels are packaged and sold as a healthy goat feed. By selling both food products derived from the cassava tuber and animal feed, farmers can utilize 100 percent of their plants and boost their incomes. "This is something the community embraces with joy and excitement," Cynthia says.

In 2013, Cynthia, 24, founded the social enterprise Kadosh Production Company in Delta state to recycle cassava waste. The venture also helps small-scale farmers get credit so they can purchase drying platforms, and it links cassava growers and processors with goat-farmer customers. With an eye set on expansion to other countries, Cynthia says she hopes her business will grow to be "a major influence in the Nigerian economy and Africa at large."

Cynthia has a bachelor's degree in textile science and polymer technology and a master's in business administration from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. She says that since she was young, her parents have inspired her to go into business.

Further inspiration came later when Cynthia volunteered to work for a year at a woman-owned bakery "to learn how to run a business of my own." At the bakery she learned about the challenges associated with running a business and how to handle those challenges. The experience "made me confident that I could run my own business," she says.

Cynthia received further business advice from a U.S. mentor — a former United Parcel Service executive. Gary Mastro is one of many experienced businesspeople [MicroMentor](#) has matched with young entrepreneurs around the world. MicroMentor is an initiative of the nonprofit humanitarian group Mercy Corps based in Oregon. More than half of the entrepreneurs who request its help are from outside the United States, the group notes.

Cynthia, center, stands with some of the  entrepreneurs she has mentored and their supporters.

Cynthia's first venture was a liquid soap company called EverGlow that makes an affordable, hygienic alternative to bar soap. "Gary is a pillar in my business and a man I respect so much," she says.

And now Cynthia is a mentor herself. In 2013 she founded Confident Women to mentor young women and teach them about home management, family relationships and how to make liquid soap so they could start their own small-scale businesses. The businesswoman later changed the name of Confident Women to the CAMY Foundation after collaborating with a partner in Zimbabwe who wanted a similar mentoring model in her country. CAMY Foundation now has more than 450 women members in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Cynthia says she communicates regularly with other YALI Network members who tell her about what is happening in other countries and let her "see the great work young leaders like me are doing."

"This encourages me a lot to keep up the work and never give up so we can have a better future." She adds that she learns a lot from the ongoing [YALIChat](#) Twitter conversation.

Cynthia encourages other YALI Network members and potential members to "maximize the opportunities from YALI Network" and to "be a change in their society."

Learn more about the [GIST Tech-I business pitch competition](#).

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## [#YALICHAT with the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Cathy Russell](#)

*Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell ([@AmbCathyRussell](#)) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at 13:00 UTC. Additional details below.*



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ssell visits girls at a school in Zambia

As young African leaders and followers of the YALI Network, you already know that the United States invests in women and girls because it's the right thing to do for gender equality and the smart thing to do for our foreign policy.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls worldwide. Every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls around the world about how women have contributed to global progress and why we need to break the barriers keeping women and girls from fully participating in society.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of presenting ten women from ten countries with the Secretary of State's [International Women of Courage Award](#). These women, including Marie Claire Tchecola from Guinea and Beatrice Epaye from the Central African Republic, have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment.

As an emergency room nurse in Guinea, Marie Claire Tchecola has been on the front lines of the fight against Ebola. When she became infected with the Ebola virus, she took precautions to protect other workers and her family from contracting the disease - and when she recovered, she went back to work. Through her leadership in the Ebola Survivors Association of Guinea, Marie Claire continues to spread awareness about the disease and fight the stigma associated with its survivors.

When Seleka rebels stormed the streets of Bangui and overtook the Central African Republic's capital, one of their first stops was the office of Beatrice Epaye, an outspoken activist who raised her voice to condemn the horrors of civil war and to call for peace, human rights, and good governance. Refusing to be intimidated, Beatrice took to the radio and met with local and international organizations, eventually becoming the president of the Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue.

Ms. Tchecola and Ms. Epaye are proof of how women can and do transform societies with little fanfare through their everyday actions. Yet in every country – from Guinea to Germany to Guatemala – women and girls face challenges and barriers that keep them from fully participating. A family may choose to send a son, but not a daughter, to school because there’s only enough money for one child’s fees. A woman may be kept from launching a new business because she can’t access capital. Or bias and stereotypes about women’s roles in society will keep a woman from her rightful seat at the peacekeeping table or in Parliament.

It will take all of us – men and women, boys and girls – to achieve the progress we need to unleash the power of women and girls. But if every one of us takes action, we can break down these barriers and open doors for women and girls of courage.

I urge you all, both my fellow women and our male allies, to [take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

*Join the YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at:*

*12:00-13:00 Cape Verde Time (CVT)*

*13:00-14:00 UTC/GMT*

*14:00-15:00 West Africa Time (WAT)*

*15:00-16:00 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)*

*18:00-19:00 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)*

*19:00-20:00 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)*

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## Eco-Pads Keep Girls in School

Lucy Athieno



Taking advantage of a morning break between classes in Buteba, Uganda, then-13-year-old Lucy Athieno set off to play with friends. Then she heard some boys shouting at her.

She looked down and saw a blotch of red on her otherwise clean uniform. Embarrassed, she quickly sat down. It was the only way to stop the boys from making fun of her. After all the other students had gone, she got up and went home. She did not return to school.

Many girls in low-income communities drop out of school when menstruation begins because they lack information and hygienic material to use.


Days went by before Athieno shared her experience with her late mother’s friend. The woman told her to continue using rags and to throw them away after use. She said, “Nobody should see your

blood. It is taboo.”

A year later, Athieno was adopted by an aunt who bought Athieno her first sanitary pads. The gift of pads made the young woman realize that the “problem” of menstruation was not unique to her. The aunt also persuaded Athieno to return to school.

When she got to secondary school, Athieno — a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member — suggested to a teacher that they cut pieces of cloth and give them to other girls. She believed all girls should have the right to good health and education and not be hindered by what is a normal biological process. But the teacher considered the idea peculiar.

Convinced that her idea was realistic and desperately needed, Athieno carried it through to university. In her second year at Makerere University in 2010, she began to volunteer with a women’s organization and was convinced her cause was justifiable. “Many girls were using rags or leaves or sitting in the sand during menstruation,” she says.

Lucy Athieno makes reusable sanitary 

Eco-Pads to support retention of girls  
in school.

As part of her volunteer work, she went to Kenya where she found an organization that was distributing sanitary pads to girls. Returning to Uganda, she purchased bed sheet material and cut it into pieces and thought, “What if I inserted something between two layers of this material – something that would absorb the blood?”

She experimented with different types of cloth pads until she settled on one that was washable, comfortable and reliable. “These pads are reusable for at least one year, making them not only affordable but environmentally friendly,” she says, adding that the pads help young women return to and stay in school. One year’s supply of pads cost just \$3, she notes.

Now 30, Athieno has bought four sewing machines to make pads that have helped hundreds of Ugandan girls. In 2013, she founded Aluta Holdings, which holds rights for the reusable “Eco-Pads.” She wants to expand access to the product to other countries.

So far, Aluta has provided pads to more than 400 girls. Meanwhile, Athieno has mentored 200 girls, encouraging them to stay in school.


“I want to impact the whole of Africa,” she says.

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## **Closing Technology Gaps in Burkina Faso**

Francine Legma didn’t take her secondary school math teacher’s advice. Instead she followed her

instincts.

Francine Legma wants to close   
technology gaps in her home  
country of Burkina Faso.


Legma earned poor grades in math and physics, so her teacher advised her to study literature “because it would be easier for me than scientific studies,” she says. But the 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member from Ouagadougou knew that studying science would lead to a better future.

With the support of her father, a university chemistry professor, Legma pursued the more challenging field and eventually earned a baccalaureate in science and mathematics. With a scholarship from the government of Burkina Faso, she went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in computer science from the Institut d’Ingénierie Informatique in Limoges, France, and a master’s degree in international commerce from Icofes in Paris.

“Like my mother, my father never put in our minds that a woman is less intelligent than a man,” Legma notes, adding that both her parents stressed hard work, integrity and motivation in pursuit of any goal. “My parents have been the fuel of my inspiration,” she says.

Now 35, Legma serves as an information technology project manager at Burkina Faso’s national telecommunications company, Onatel. Through the company, she launched mobile payment, postpaid and customer loyalty systems.

She frequently participates in online discussions about technology “gaps.” One is between developed and developing countries in telecommunications infrastructure, telecommunications law and Internet access. Another is between women’s and men’s use of new technologies.

Legma, center, teaches a group of young   
women about computer applications.

As a response to the latter concern, Legma started the nonprofit group [Femmes et Tic](#), which aims to educate young girls and women on the opportunities of the Internet and new technologies, and to raise awareness about the dangers and risks of their misuse.

Next on Legma’s agenda are plans for a summer “tech camp.” The camp will teach girls how to use the Internet, give oral presentations and hone their leadership skills. She has enlisted local schools and universities to help her develop the curriculum and is looking for other partners to help her acquire computers and other equipment.

Legma says she would like to add more technology classes for women and girls but is restricted by the limited number of skilled volunteer instructors. She hopes that other YALI Network members might be interested in becoming volunteer trainers. Potential trainers can find out more on the [Femmes et Tic](#) website.

“For me, trained girls and women is a must if I really want to contribute to change in a better way in

my country," she says.

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## Nigerian Seeks Justice Against Domestic Abuse

*"The change we so desire in the world today starts with each one of us. Don't give up."*

— Naomi Osemedua

Naomi Osemedua says it should be easier for women to speak out about gender violence.

"Victims are afraid to come out and talk, as they are afraid of stigmatization," she explains. "They are afraid that when they come out people will say they are useless or that whatever happened to them was their fault.

Naomi Osemedua, center, stands up for  justice with fellow anti-abuse advocates in Abuja, Nigeria.

As in many cultures, women in Nigeria are often blamed for their own abuse, with critics suggesting their clothes or appearance provoked the assault or violence. Osemedua, a YALI Network member, founded the Nigerian branch of Making a Difference (M.A.D.) Positive International in Abuja in 2011 to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse and domestic violence. The organization's work extends beyond the capital city to Lagos and Abeokuta and to the rural areas of Kwara, Delta and Rivers states.

Osemedua, 36 and an abuse victim herself, has positive messages for women and youth — that they can become agents for social change.

"We must not talk alone but create action," she says.

The advocate constantly responds to requests for information about abuse and provides inspiration to help stop it. She regularly appears as a guest on local radio programs using passion and humor when talking about abuse, girls' education and other women's issues. She reaches out to women and girls, men and boys through social media as well as public and private partner organizations like WellBeing Foundation Africa, Project Pink Blue and GenVoices.

Although Osemedua estimates that so far those efforts have reached more than 10,000 women, it's not enough.

"It has been overwhelming because when you think you have started, you discover that you have not




even scratched the surface,” she explains.

Through M.A.D., in 2014 Osemedua helped organize Nigeria’s “1 Billion Rising for Justice” event to demand justice for women who have been sexually assaulted. Organizers of the event, which happened on February 14 in cities around the world, proclaimed, “I refuse to stand by as more than 1 billion women experience violence. ... I am rising for justice.”

In Abuja people danced to the words of the “1 Billion Rising for Justice” anthem, which includes these words: “I can see a world where we all live, safe and free from all oppression. No more rape or incest or abuse. Women are not a possession.”

Osemedua is confident that change is on the horizon and that gender-based violence will end. “It may take time, but it will be worth the wait as people are searching for sincere and genuine change-makers,” she says.

Naomi Osemedua, right, is interviewed  by a member of the local media in Abuja, Nigeria.

Osemedua contributes to her community in other ways. The YALI Network member is active in the government’s YouWin! Program, serving as a volunteer mentor for entrepreneurs ages 18 to 45. She also works with with a leadership academy for girls ages 10 to 14 that focuses on leadership development. She says her work with the academy has been fulfilling.

“The work is important because these young girls will be the leaders of tomorrow, and there is no telling how far the impact will go. We believe that one girl can change the world.”

“Other YALI network members can help girls in their communities by mentoring them. Even if it is just one girl at a time. ... with one girl, over time much can be achieved,” she adds. “We hope that through our work with these girls that each one of them will indeed have a sense of true leadership and settle for nothing less than the best that they can be.”

One of five siblings, the new mother credits her father with being her “greatest supporter and inspiration. She says her father “continually lavished love and affection on all of us ... [and] made sure we had the best education.”

Osemedua says she has been “greatly inspired” by the YALI Network. “Just reading about all the great stuff others are doing makes me want to do more for my community and the world.”

A [video](#) of Nigeria’s 2014 1 Billion Rising for Justice dance event is available on YouTube. The song’s lyrics are available on the 1 Billion Rising for Justice [website](#).

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# First Lady, Peace Corps Join to ‘Let Girls Learn’

*“When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation’s economy.”*

— First lady Michelle Obama

*“Every girl matters, and when she is given the opportunity to get an education, everyone in her life benefits.”*


— Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet

Ugandan students read at school. USAID aims to improve equitable access to  education.

U.S. first lady Michelle Obama and the Peace Corps have joined to help girls around the world “get the education they deserve.”

Globally, 62 million girls are not in school. Millions more are fighting to stay there. They often face harassment, discrimination, threats and violence just to get an education. And even when girls reach school, they may not have adequate materials to help them learn to read, write and do basic math.

“That just doesn’t limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries,” Obama said in announcing the White House–Peace Corps “Let Girls Learn” collaboration March 3.

According to the White House, girls’ attendance in secondary school is linked to later marriage,  later childbearing, lower maternal and infant mortality rates, lower birthrates and lower rates of HIV/AIDS. The World Bank reports that every year of secondary school education increases a girl’s future earning power by 18 percent.

“When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation’s economy,” the first lady said.


Let Girls Learn will empower local leaders to put lasting solutions in place. Peace Corps volunteers who live and work at the grass-roots level will serve as catalysts of community-led change.

In the collaboration’s first year, Let Girls Learn will target 11 countries, six of them in Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mozambique, Togo and Uganda.

In Togo, 69 percent of adolescent girls do not complete primary school because of lack of funds for tuition, school supplies and uniforms. In Burkina Faso, 28 percent of girls give birth before the age of 18, interrupting school attendance. In Ghana, more than half of adolescent girls believe that domestic violence is justifiable, a belief that can be countered with education. In Mozambique, just 37 percent of adolescent girls have comprehensive knowledge of HIV prevention, putting them at

risk.

From helping to start a school library to organizing a technology camp for girls, this collaboration will bring increased focus and resources to the issue of girls' education.

The new collaboration extends the existing Let Girls Learn initiative launched by the U.S.  Agency for International Development in 2014. USAID focuses on ensuring that girls and boys can safely enroll and learn in schools and that all children leave school with the skills they will need to thrive. USAID works to improve teaching techniques and learning materials; support regular assessments of reading skills; maximize classroom instruction time spent on basic skills, especially reading; support instruction in native languages; and promote parent and community involvement in education.

As USAID Chief Strategy Officer Carla Koppell says, "Because an educated girl is a force for change, she is the leader and peacemaker of tomorrow."


A [video](#) of Michelle Obama speaking about Let Girls Learn is available on YouTube.

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## **'Accidental Journalist' Takes on Noncommunicable Diseases**

Adanma Odefa considers herself an "accidental journalist."

She looked forward to a career in law. But when she was 26 and just starting out as a lawyer, her father died. "My whole world shifted," she said, when she realized he died because neither he nor his doctors recognized the symptoms of diabetes and hypertension. Later, "when I learned my dad could have lived for decades on end, I was angry. Then I turned my anger about his death into resolve," she said.

Adanma Odefa, left, interviews the head  of the health center in Okondi, Nigeria.


Odefa said her father was a major influence on her life. "I became a lawyer because he wanted me to be one. I founded my public health nonprofit with primary focus on diabetes because he died of diabetes. I am in TV broadcasting ... my dad studied mass communications in university," she recalled.

"My father felt that a good education as best as he could afford was the biggest debt he owed me as a father."

With support from the German Fund, the YALI Network member and resident of Abuja started her nonprofit, which is devoted to teaching people about disease prevention.

The exposure she received through that effort brought her to the attention of producers at African Independent Television, who asked her to join a morning talk show. The show helped her reach a wide audience with public health messages. “When I saw how effective media was in sending out my message, I became a broadcaster,” the “accidental journalist” continued.


“Part of my message is to go and have a checkup,” she said, adding that her nonprofit provides, at no cost, checkups, body mass evaluations and counseling. “We talk to people about prevention, prevention, prevention,” through changes in diet, hygiene practices and lifestyle, she said. “It’s a lot cheaper to prevent than to treat.”

Odefa, right, looks on as a  representative of Nigeria’s government cuts a ribbon signaling the opening of a secondary school building outside Abuja.

Nigeria’s ministry of health invited her to become part of a committee charged with drafting a national policy on noncommunicable diseases. From there, she was appointed to a working group for the 2011 United Nations high-level meeting on the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases, which include diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancers and chronic respiratory diseases.

Chronic noncommunicable diseases are steadily increasing around the world, and 80 percent of deaths attributed to them occur in developing countries, according to the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

“We used to think that public health was a wealthy population problem,” Odefa said. “But it’s not. It is becoming a bigger problem, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where people are not necessarily wealthy but are becoming diabetic. ... Hypertension is a big killer and is on the increase.”

Odefa, right, looks on as a  representative of Nigeria’s government cuts a ribbon signaling the opening of a secondary school building outside Abuja.

Odefa also uses television to talk to women about sexual and reproductive health, explaining the causes, symptoms, risks and treatments of infections of the womb and ovaries. “For far too long, the issues of reproductive health and family planning for adolescents have been taboo. ... Consequently, pregnancy and childbirth-related complications remain the leading killer of teenage girls,” she said.

With access to television messaging, Odefa wanted to go after another problem — that of a lack of secondary education for orphans. In 2013, she organized an on-air fundraising drive that brought in enough money to build a secondary school building on the outskirts of Abuja.

And with her television station’s backing, she raised funds to upgrade a children’s clinic in Kaduna. That led to an ongoing relationship between the station and the clinic, she said.

“I almost forget I’m a lawyer,” she said. “This life of community service is so exciting.”

Of the YALI Network, Odefa said it “has proven to be a good virtual meeting point for young Africans with bright ideas. It gives me ... the feeling that I am not alone in my efforts and can always find support in others like me who are keen on promoting the common good.”

“My advice to other YALI members and potential members is to be consistent, put others first, be passionate and and be true to your efforts.”

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## 10 Reasons to Invest in Women and Girls

A girl at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in Kenya smiles after receiving her school uniform. 

They're your mothers and your daughters, your sisters and your aunts, your cousins and your friends. There are so many reasons to invest in them, besides the fact that you love them. Here are 10:

1. **More inclusive government.** If you'd like to see less fighting among your elected officials, encourage women to run for public office. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic.
2. **Improved public service delivery.** The next time you're frustrated by poor roads or a lack of potable water, vote for a woman. USAID reports that women's political participation increases cooperation across party and ethnic lines and government responsiveness to citizens.
3. **Greater farm production.** The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization found that by empowering women farmers with the same access to land, new technologies and capital as men, crop yields could be increased by as much as 30 percent.
4. **Fewer hungry people.** When women succeed, society succeeds. Nowhere is that more clear than in food production. In that same report, the Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that a 30 percent boost in production can reduce the number of hungry people by 150 million.
5. **Increased buying power.** As the World Bank's chief economist, Lawrence Summers said, “Investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world.” Each year of secondary school boosts a girl's future earning power by roughly 20 percent.
6. **Stronger economies.** Educating a girl pays dividends for her family and her country, too. According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP increases on average by 3 percent.
7. **Fewer child deaths.** Women who are educated are better able to take care of themselves and their children. According to UNESCO, a child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to live past age five.
8. **Less HIV/AIDS.** For UNICEF, education is essential to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS. That's because girls who are better educated are less likely to engage in casual sex.
9. **Fewer conflicts.** When women's lives are valued, their experiences considered and their voices

heard, better outcomes prevail. Through its peacekeeping operations, the UN has found that when women are included, deadly conflicts can be avoided.

10. **More lasting peace.** Women have an important role to play in driving reconciliation and reconstruction. According to the UN, including women in conflict negotiation and peacebuilding efforts can lead to more widely accepted and durable peace agreements.


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## Replay: First Lady's Remarks on Women and Girls

*Most times, a speech suits the time, place and audience for which it was intended. But sometimes, a speech transcends that time, space and audience. First lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2014 summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is one of those speeches. With honesty and vigor, she addressed the need to change attitudes and beliefs about women and girls. Here are some of her remarks.*

[...]

Today, I want us to talk — and I mean really talk. I want to speak as openly and honestly as possible about the issues we care about and what it means to be a leader, not just in Africa but in the world today.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to  participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

Now, one of the issues that I care deeply about is [...] girls' education. And across the globe, the statistics on this issue are heartbreaking. Right now, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school, including nearly 30 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa. And as we saw in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen, and in Nigeria where more than 200 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory by Boko Haram terrorists, even when girls do attend school, they often do so at great risk.

And as my husband said earlier this week, we know that when girls aren't educated, that doesn't just limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries as well.

Now, in recent years, there's been a lot of talk about how to address this issue, and how we need more schools and teachers, more money for toilets and uniforms, transportation, school fees. And of course, all of these issues are critically important, and I could give a perfectly fine speech today

about increasing investments in girls' education around the world.

But I said I wanted to be honest. And if I do that, we all know that the problem here isn't only about resources, it's also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether fathers and mothers think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether societies cling to outdated laws and traditions that oppress and exclude women, or whether they view women as full citizens entitled to fundamental rights.

So the truth is, I don't think it's really productive to talk about issues like girls' education unless we're willing to have a much bigger, bolder conversation about how women are viewed and treated in the world today. And we need to be having this conversation on every continent and in every country on this planet. And that's what I want to do today with all of you, because so many of you are already leading the charge for progress in Africa.

Now, as an African-American woman, this conversation is deeply personal to me. The roots of my family tree are in Africa. As you know, my husband's father was born and raised in Kenya — and members of our extended family still live there. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Africa a number of times over the years, including four trips as first lady, and I have brought my mother and my daughters along with me whenever I can. So believe me, the blood of Africa runs through my veins, and I care deeply about Africa's future.

Now, the status of women in Africa is also personal to me as a woman. See, what I want you all to understand is that I am who I am today because of the people in my family — particularly the men in my family — who valued me and invested in me from the day I was born. I had a father, a brother, uncles, grandfathers who encouraged me and challenged me, protected me, and told me that I was smart and strong and beautiful.

And as I grew up, the men who raised me set a high bar for the type of men I'd allow into my life — which is why I went on to marry a man who had the good sense to fall in love with a woman who was his equal — and to treat me as such. A man who supports and reveres me, and who supports and reveres our daughters as well.


And throughout my life — understand this — every opportunity I've had, every achievement I'm proud of has stemmed from this solid foundation of love and respect. So given these experiences, it saddens and confuses me to see that too often, women in some parts of Africa are still denied the rights and opportunities they deserve to realize their potential.

Now, let's be very clear: In many countries in Africa, women have made tremendous strides. More girls are attending school. More women are starting businesses. Maternal mortality has plummeted. And more women are serving in parliaments than ever before. In fact, in some countries, more than 30 percent of legislators are women. In Rwanda, it's over 50 percent — which, by the way, is more than double the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

Now, these achievements represent remarkable progress. But at the same time, when girls in some places are still being married off as children, sometimes before they even reach puberty; when female genital mutilation still continues in some countries; when human trafficking, rape and domestic abuse are still too common, and perpetrators are often facing no consequences for their crimes — then we still have some serious work to do in Africa and across the globe.

And while I have great respect for cultural differences, I think we can all agree that practices like genital cutting, forced child marriage, domestic violence are not legitimate cultural practices, they are serious human rights violations and have no place in any country on this Earth. These practices have no place in our shared future, because we all know that our future lies in our people — in their talent, their ambition, their drive. And no country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.

And I know this firsthand from the history of my own country. A century ago, women in America weren't allowed to vote. Decades ago, it was perfectly legal for employers to refuse to hire women. Domestic violence was viewed not as a crime, but as a private family matter between a man and his wife.

First lady Michelle Obama hugs a  participant of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

But in each generation, people of conscience stood up and rejected these unjust practices. They chained themselves to the White House gates, waged hunger strikes in prison to win the right to vote. They took their bosses to court. They spoke out about rape and fought to prosecute rapists, despite the stigma and shame. They left their abusive husbands, even when that meant winding up on the streets with their children.

And today in America, we see the results of those hard-fought battles: 60 percent of college students today are women. Women are now more than half the workforce. And in recent decades, women's employment has added nearly \$2 trillion to the U.S. economy — yes, trillion.

Now, are we anywhere near full economic, political, and domestic equality in the United States? Absolutely not. We still struggle every day with serious issues like violence against women, unequal pay. Women are still woefully underrepresented in our government and in the senior ranks of our corporations.

But slowly, generation after generation, we've been moving in the right direction because of brave individuals who were willing to risk their jobs, their reputations, and even their lives to achieve equality. And it wasn't just brave women who made these sacrifices. It was also brave men, too — men who hired women, men who passed laws to empower women, men who prosecuted other men who abused women.

So to all the men, my brothers here today, I have a simple message: We need you to shake things up. Too often, women are fighting these battles alone, but men like you, progressive men who are already ahead of the curve on women's issues, you all are critically important to solving this problem.

And that starts by doing a little introspection. And I say this not just to the 250 of you who are in the room today, but to men around the world. Men in every country need to look into their hearts and souls and ask themselves whether they truly view and treat women as their equals. And then when



you all encounter men in your lives who answer no to that question, then you need to take them to task. You need to tell them that any man who uses his strength to oppress women is a coward, and he is holding back the progress of his family and his country.

Tell them that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal. And I want you to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons.

And to the women here, my sisters [...] I want us as women to understand that oppression is not a one-way street.

See, too often, without even realizing it, we as women internalize the oppression we face in our societies by believing harmful messages about how we should look and act, particularly as women of color — messages that tell us that we're ugly or irrelevant, that we don't deserve full control over our bodies, that we should keep our mouths shut and just do as we're told. And then, too often, we turn around and impose those same beliefs on other women and girls in our lives, including our own daughters.

For example, in countries across the globe, there are women who still support and carry out the practice of genital cutting. There are women who are still insisting on marrying off their young daughters or keeping them home from school to help with the housework.

And then there are the more subtle harms that we afflict — inflict on each other — the harm of spurning our sisters who don't conform to traditions because we're jealous or suspicious of their courage and their freedom; the harm of turning a blind eye when a woman in our community is being abused because we don't want to cause conflict with our neighbors by speaking up.

And I imagine that for some of you here today, getting your degree might have meant disobeying or disappointing your families. Maybe while you've been acing your studies and thriving in your career, you have a grandmother who has been wringing her hands because you're not yet married.

But, my sisters, you all are here today because you have found a way to overcome these challenges, and you have blossomed into powerful, accomplished women. And we need you all to help others do the same.

All of us, men and women on every continent, we all need to identify these problems in ourselves and in our communities, and then commit to solving them. And I say this to you not just as lawyers and activists and business leaders, but as current and future parents. Because as a mother myself, I can tell you that this is where change truly happens. With the behavior we model, with our actions and inactions, every day, we as parents shape the values of the next generation.


For example, my parents never had the chance to attend university, but they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could. And they weren't threatened by the prospect of me having more opportunities than they had — just the opposite. They were thrilled.

And that's what should drive us all: the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter

and bolder than our generation. And that is exactly the kind of work that so many of you are already doing in your families and your communities, which is why I'm so proud of you.

[...]

This is where Africa's future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making those dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa's course to embrace that future.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to  selected participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014, during a roundtable discussion.

Because ultimately, that's what leadership is really about. It's not just about holding degrees or holding elected office. And it's not about preserving our own power or continuing traditions that oppress and exclude.

Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential. And when we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. They won't wait. That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school, because they'll know how important it is.

And we all know the ripple effects we can have when we give our girls a chance to learn. We all know that girls who are educated earn higher wages. They're more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse. They have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

So no matter where you all work, no matter what issue you focus on — whether it's health or microfinance, human rights or clean energy — women's equality must be a central part of your work. It must. Because make no mistake about it, the work of transforming attitudes about women, it now falls on your shoulders. And it's up to you all to embrace the future. [...]

And I know this won't be easy. I know that you will face all kinds of obstacles and resistance — you already have. But when you get tired or frustrated, when things seem hopeless and you start thinking about giving up, I want you to remember the words of the man whom your fellowship is now named — and I know these words have been spoken many times. As Madiba once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done." And I, oh, I know the truth of those words from my own history and from the history of my country.

My ancestors came here in chains. My parents and grandparents knew the sting of segregation and discrimination. Yet I attended some of the best universities in this country. I had career opportunities beyond my wildest dreams. And today, I live in the White House, a building — but we

must remember, we live in a home that was constructed by slaves.

Today, I watch my daughters — two beautiful African-American girls — walking our dogs in the shadow of the Oval Office. And today, I have the privilege of serving and representing the United States of America across the globe.


So my story and the story of my country is the story of the impossible getting done. And I know that can be your story and that can be Africa's story too. But it will take new energy, it will take new ideas, new leadership from young people like you. That is why we brought you here today.

We've done this because we believe in Africa, and we believe in all of you. And understand we are filled with so much hope and so many expectations for what you will achieve. You hold the future of your continent in your hands, and I cannot wait to see everything you will continue to accomplish in the years ahead.

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## Women and Girls: A Sound Investment

Some of you have asked, "Why should we focus on women and girls? Why shouldn't we focus on empowering everyone — women and girls, men and boys?" It's a good question. The answer is because a gap exists between the opportunities and resources available to men and boys and those available to women and girls.


For every year of secondary schooling a  girl receives, her earning power increases by 15-25 percent

According to the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID), 1 in 3 girls around the world will experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, 1 in 5 girls in the developing world who enroll in primary school never finish, and 1 in 7 girls in the developing world are forced into marriage before their 15th birthdays.

A girl's situation does not improve with age. According to the [World Health Organization](#), complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally. According to the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), women own just between 10 and 20 percent of the world's land, despite making up more than 40 percent of its agricultural labor force. And according to [USAID](#), women-owned enterprises make up as little as 10 percent of all businesses in Africa.

Whether in the classroom, the hospital or the office, women and girls face challenges unique to their gender. The good news is that even a small investment in a woman or a girl can have a huge return.

# When Women Succeed, Society Succeeds


Women make up nearly 64 percent of  Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies and nearly 39 percent of Rwanda's Senate. Many credit women's political participation in Rwanda with helping the country recover from its civil war.

Investing in women and girls means taking actions — big and small — to bring about gender equality. It means changing society's attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls. It means rethinking the roles and responsibilities of women and girls. It means creating a world where women and girls enjoy the same human rights and have access to the same opportunities as men and boys.

Investing in women and girls isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Here are some benefits investing in women and girls can have:

**Stronger democracies.** Women's participation in politics has tangible gains for democracy. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Not only that, it also found that higher rates of women's political participation are associated with lower levels of government corruption.

**Improved public service delivery.** Including women in the political space has benefits for citizens, too, because women are more likely to invest in the public good than their male counterparts. In India, for example, USAID found that political districts with more female representatives enjoyed greater community benefits such as investments in drinking water facilities and roadways.

By including women in the peacekeeping  process, countries ensure more lasting and just outcomes following conflict.

**Enhanced food security.** The FAO estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent. That would be enough to feed an additional 150 million people.

**More lasting peace.** When women play a role in conflict situations, they become drivers of reconciliation and reconstruction. Evidence shows that including women in conflict-related decisionmaking and peace-building efforts can lead to more durable, comprehensive and widely accepted peace agreements.

**Greater economic growth.** According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP will grow on average by 3 percent. And a girl's individual earning power increases by 15-25 percent for every year of secondary schooling she receives.

These are just a few ways investing in women and girls enables a community, a country and a continent to flourish.

## What's Next?

As Secretary Kerry said, “No country can succeed unless every citizen is empowered to contribute to its future. And no peace can endure if women are not afforded a central role.”

So over the next month, commit to investing in women and girls. It can be something as simple as reading a book to your younger sister or as elaborate as hosting a series of financial literacy workshops for women in your community. The goal is to act and, through your actions, bring about a more equal, prosperous and secure world for everyone.

Think of the impact the YALI Network could make if all 130,000 of you act.

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